
Erasmus with a child

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To leave your home, family and friends, the university you know well and your familiar environment, is definitely not an easy thing for any of our exchange students. On top of that, if you already have children and must also consider what is going to happen with them during your semester or year abroad, e.g. where they are going to be during the time you attend classes, the participation in the Erasmus (or other exchange) programme becomes even more complicated.

During the academic year 2012-13, the Faculty of Social Sciences at Charles University is hosting Judith Schüler from European university Viadrina (Frankfurt an der Oder), who is currently in Prague with her 2-year-old son Karl. I-Forum approached Judith to share her experiences of having a child whilst studying abroad.

Judith, since you study European Studies and are interested in the European Union and mainly the central European countries, you were probably very keen to study abroad for a while. How difficult a decision was it to leave your home and come to a completely foreign city with your young son?

Since I started my Masters in European Studies it was clear to me that I wanted to study abroad for some time. I got pregnant in my first semester, yet my wish to study abroad still persisted. In that sense, my child has never been an obstacle, rather just an extra challenge in realising my plans. In particular, I was sure that I wanted to go to the Czech Republic, as I was always interested in Central European countries (because of their history, culture, politics, language, etc.) and the historical and political relations between Germany and Czech Republic. Within my studies, I also focused on minority issues in Central European countries and I wanted to deepen my understanding surrounding this topic. On top of this, I had learnt Czech during my Bachelor studies and I wanted to improve my language skills.

I chose Prague for several reasons. First of all, I was really attracted to the city itself. Having already travelled to Prague a few times, I had fallen in love with it right from the start and I always had the wish to live there for a while. I was also interested in how it feels to study at Charles University – a university with such a long and important history.

Furthermore, I already knew some people living in Prague and I hoped that they could help us to arrange our stay, especially at the beginning. It turned out in the end that this was almost unnecessary, but it is still good to know that there is someone to ask in the case of an emergency.

From the beginning, it was clear that my boyfriend (Karl's father) would not be able to come with us. Therefore, the most important thing for me to consider before applying was if he agreed with my plans. It turned out that he did agree and we hoped to see each other as often as possible, so the relatively short distance between Berlin and Prague was another advantage for me.

After I got the confirmation from my home university that I was selected to study at Charles University on the Erasmus program, the funding became the biggest issue. I realised that childcare services in Prague for children under the age of 3 are much more expensive than in Germany. Luckily, I managed to receive financial support from the German state and a special funding for students with children provided by the Erasmus program and DAAD (Deutscher Akademischer Austauschdienst).

What did you have to organise for the move, both back at home and here in Prague? How long did it take to arrange everything?

I started to arrange everything for our stay from the moment I was informed that I had been given the place within the Erasmus program. This was at the beginning of 2012, so it took me around half a year. In this time I had to apply for the funding, arrange both the accommodation and the childcare in Prague, and learn about other things such as health insurance etc.

I did a lot of research by myself but also used personal contacts to find a suitable "školka" (nursery) and realistic accommodation. Luckily, I was quickly informed by the International Office of the Faculty of Social Sciences and the European Office that we could apply for family accommodation in Hvězda dormitories.

Unfortunately, the Halls of Residence were unable to confirm our reservation before summer, so I kept searching for a flat in the meantime. I focused mainly, however, on looking for a place in a nursery.

In summer 2012, I also travelled to Prague to visit several childcare institutions in advance, because I wanted this aspect to be organised in person. We arrived in Prague four weeks before the semester began to have enough time for the adjustment period into the nursery.

What services does your home university provide for students with children? Is there, for example, any campus nursery or special accommodation for students with children? Do the students with children help each other, for example with babysitting?

At my home university there is no campus nursery, however short-term childcare is provided in the case of an emergency. I guess it is also possible (e.g. for visiting professors) to arrange regular childcare services in a state nursery in Frankfurt (Oder) or for a nurse to come to the rooms of the universities. My university also partly covers the costs for childcare services (up to 100 Euros each semester).

Furthermore, you can find two rooms equipped with toys, books, blankets, pillows, etc. which parents can use with their children there. There are also a few rest rooms which are equipped with a table where you can change nappies. I don't know if there is any special accommodation for families as in my region it is more common to live in a private flat. This is what we do in Berlin.

Basically, everything concerning family is organised by a special department for family matters. Besides personal consultation, the staff also organise several events where parents (both students and staff) and their children can meet each other and be informed of special issues concerning family and university life.

In Prague, you live in Hvězda, in the so called "family hall of residence" where young families and other students with children are housed. Have you been able to find friends or people to support you whilst living in Prague with your son? What does your typical day look like?

Most of the families we have met are very kind, open, patient (for example when I try to express myself in Czech) and willing to help me in any situation. We have already received two invitations for dinner, which were really appreciated. Above all, I have the feeling that all the families try to support each other as much as possible, as all of them know how hard it is to reconcile student and family life. As for me, living in Hvězda is a good way to get in touch with young families from a similar background. I have also never lived in a university dormitory before so it is an interesting experience.

Still, after this short period of time (Judith and Karl arrived to Prague 3 months ago), I would not say that the families we have met at Hvězda have become real friends. I think this needs some more time. It is definitely an advantage though, especially for the children, as they always have someone around to play with.

What does our typical day look like? From Monday till Thursday we are out and about for pretty much the entire day and nearly every minute is planned out. We get up early, have breakfast and leave the flat at around 8 in the morning. I then take Karl to nursery. We usually return home at around 6 in the evening. After dinner, I put Karl to bed and prepare my work for university.

During the week, there is not much time to meet other families. The weekends, however, look different, as this time is completely reserved for activities with Karl. We either spend some time alone or with friends (sometimes with families from the dorm), mostly outside. At the beginning of the semester, we would often go to Malá Strana or Anděl. The area close to Hvězda is also amazing, it is great for children and there are playgrounds on pretty much every other corner. I also love Divoká Šárka, Obora Hvězda and Landronka. Overall, there is a lot to explore for the both of us. Next semester I would like to join some sports activities with Karl, which I think could also be a good chance to meet some locals.

You had already lived abroad before, as a German teacher in Tallin, Estonia and for several months in Budapest, Hungary. If you compare your stays abroad back then with your stay in Prague now, how much more difficult it is to live (and study) abroad with a child?

All in all, the crucial point which is different, is that I am not only responsible for myself but also for my son. For example, I can not really afford to get ill. Also every decision that I make has to depend on how Karl can handle it. As a result I cannot take as many classes as 'normal' students do because the stress would also affect Karl. Furthermore, I have to be even more well structured and disciplined than usual. When Karl is in nursery I prepare things for university, and if he is not I have to care for him by myself which is more or less like a full-time job. There is not much time for anything else. I am also not very flexible, as I cannot go out at night, visit museums and exhibitions, or even simply go to the cinema with a friend. Neither am I able to travel that much within the Czech Republic or join events, e.g. organized by the International Club at the Faculty of Social Sciences. These are all things that I savoured in Estonia and Hungary. The possibility to meet new people, especially students, are rather limited which I have to say from time to time makes me really sad. On the other hand, I realise my life with Karl offers me a broader and deeper insight into Czech culture, concerning the educational system and values about child-raising to name just two aspects. This is truly a great chance to get to know a country or culture from another perspective and I could not experience anything like this in either Estonia or Hungary.

You already knew some Czech before coming to Prague. We suppose that this was of an advantage to you when organising your arrival – do you think that it would have been possible to run all the preparation without any knowledge of the local language (since, for example, we do not house any other international students in the 'family hall of residence' Hvězda)?

Basically, I am convinced that it is possible to get along without any knowledge of the Czech language. Of course, it does depend on what one expects from the stay. Concerning childcare services, it is easy to find a private nursery where the staff speak very good English, and also French or German, but I think it can be slightly different with state nurseries. In general, some basic knowledge is extremely helpful, for example because the staff at the dormitory do not speak very good English. Having said that, in my experience they are very patient and there is always someone around who is willing to help. I think it could be very helpful for families without any knowledge of Czech in Hvězda to have somebody 'official' who can help to arrange things, at least in the beginning. (The European Office had an English speaking Erasmus practical placement student in Hvězda Hall of Residence during the period of arrivals at the end of September and the beginning of October 2012; sadly, it was not possible to cover the few earlier arrivals.)

Thank you for the interview.